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"...nobody comes away in one piece."
--D. F. Brown, "Still Later There Are War Stories"

Chapter 1
Vietnam War Poetry: Fusing the Past with the Present

"Time is a telescope aimed at your memory..."

--Horace Coleman, "Bring Your Lunch," In the Grass

W.H. Auden once wrote: "One demands two things of a poem. Firstly, it must be a well-made verbal object that does honor to the language in which it is written. Secondly, it must say something significant about a reality common to us all, but perceived from a unique perspective. What the poet says has never been said before, but, once he has said it, his readers recognize its validity for themselves." Auden's criteria for poetry's effectiveness for the reader especially apply to poetry that deals with that strangely human experience of war.

War is a phenomenon that often unites its participants in a sort of reluctant camaraderie while uniting the rest of the world in a sort of idealized sense of respect for the cause and its perpetrators. When successful, war poetry becomes the uniting force between disjointed perspectives. It is the medium that expertly and powerfully uses language to hold up the war experience as a reflection of the problems and failures of society.

It is a genre of poetry that seeks to create meaning for a seemingly undefinable experience and Vietnam War poetry seems to be doubly charged, not only in defining these experiences for the soldier himself, but also in defining these experiences for a public which did not evince

great support for the war and had no true understanding of its peculiarities.

War poetry is a western tradition extending back into such ancient works as Homer's *Iliad* and the war poetry of the past has sometimes served as a sort of public relations tool celebrating the tragic heroism of brave and honorable soldiers with patriotic enthusiasm while, at the same time, lamenting the sad fact that violent death is somehow a necessary component of the human experience. In reading war poetry of the Vietnam War, however, one gets a sense that these soldiers experienced something uniquely brutal: a life-altering experience that has divided their lives into pre-Vietnam and post-Vietnam eras and that has fragmented their perception of life in such a way that they find it difficult to construct a cohesive text that accurately depicts their experience.

In the context of the Vietnam War, the poet is confronted with an experience that disallows the production of poetry of an epic scale. This was a war that was never officially declared and that maintained tenuously little public support from which to build a sense of epic heroism. According to W.D. Ehrhart, "Even in the longer poetic works such as McAvoy Layne's *How Audie Murphy Died in Vietnam* (1973) or Dick Shea's *Vietnam Simply* (1967), the whole becomes lost in the parts, and there seems to be no cosmic interplay at all, just the momentary lyrical thoughts of poets who see nothing but that day, that moment, that fire

fight, who feel that perhaps nothing else will ever be, nor ever has been, quite the same" (*Unaccustomed Mercy* viii).

The fragmented nature of his experience presents the soldier-poet with no clear hero and no clear enemy around which to build an epic narrative. He cannot define his experience within the terms of an epic hero or epic villain because the soldier-poet often sees elements of heroism or enmity existing within himself. This lack of a defining sense of the war forces its soldier-poets to pick up the fragments of their war experience and infuse them with a level of insight and artistry that allows both the reader and the poet himself to bring them to some sort of closure.

Poetry provides an ideal forum for this act. As Stephen P. Hidalgo writes, "Poetry functions in this dialogue to constructively question all verbal (and thereby revisionist) representations of experience, as it constantly discloses to us the interpretive function of sense-making as a process. Like other literary forms, but more intensely than they, poetry reminds us of the centrality and the severe limits of perceptiveness and of memory in making sense of experience" (7).

The poet's inability to create epic is further complicated by the complexity of modern social issues that cast an even thicker haze over the poet's perceptions: race, class, gender. It is difficult for the "soldier-poet," as W.D. Ehrhart aptly titles him, to make sense of these issues

in the context of a life that has involved the tragedy and confusion of the Vietnam War experience. The poet must make sense of the world around him within the context of these issues and thus, "endures a kind of social, political, and historical marginalization which the war poem seeks to invert, redefining the center of common experience out of its socially and psychologically repressed margins" (Hidalgo 5). Through his poetry, the soldier-poet attempts to make his experience a vantage-point for viewing the world, for both himself and for the reader, rather than a stumbling block.

This is not a simple task and many of the soldier-poets miss the mark. In his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (2nd ed., 1800) William Wordsworth wrote: "I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity." It seems that the many of the soldier-poets of the Vietnam War have forgotten the importance of Wordsworth's statement. They write in the unpolished meter of raw emotion, setting forth the truth of experience without the insight that makes it valuable.

The soldier-poet of the Vietnam war is most successful when he allows himself to reflect on the experience about which he writes. There is a much greater lesson to be learned for both the poet and his audience when the poem is a poem in which the poet is able to transcend the bounds of memory and psychological captivity and produces a moment of epiphany in which both the poet and the reader are able to see a clearing in the hazy metaphors of memory. Just as

Wordsworth suggests, this allows the poet to step back from the immediacy of experience and emotion without stepping out of it, thereby creating an ideal atmosphere in which to attribute meaning to an experience which inherently questions all previous understanding. As D.F. Brown, another soldier-poet, writes in his poem "First Person - 1981:"

> I get through these days
> The lowest part of the jungle
> a pale green gnarl
> roots and vines
> searching for sunlight
> through
> this tangle (*Carrying the Darkness* 58).

These soldier-poets are searching for the sunlight that will bring them home, bring them up out of the jungle that entangles their minds and gnarls their past and will allow them to find a renewed sense of purpose, a new framework for understanding the past that will not erase its truth.

It is precisely because of this struggle for both meaning and truth that it is important that the poetry of the soldier-poet's poetry possesses both emotional impact and intellectual insight. The most successfully engaging Vietnam War poetry has the function of bearing witness to the horror, tragedy, and strange beauty of war so that both the poet and his audience can gain from the poetic experience and the experience from which it was born Each poet is "a powerful witness to the war and its aftermath; each has a direct connection to the war itself that emerges as an authentic voice commanding authority" (Ehrhart,

Unaccustomed Mercy 2). The successful soldier-poet recreates his experience in such a way that the reader identifies in some small way with that moment of experience and, thus, gain a greater understanding, not only of himself, but also of the nature of the modern world.

One example of the emotional excess that enfeebles this genre is the work of Elliot Richman, a fairly prolific soldier-poet of the Vietnam War, whose poetry generally consists of an avalanche of emotion from which it becomes clear that Richman has not benefited from the wisdom of Wordsworth's poetic tradition. Richmond's poetry is quite clearly the result of much "spontaneous overflow" tempered by very little "emotion recollected in tranquillity." For example, these lines from Richmond's poem "Dulce Et Decorum Est," reflect this problem in his poetry: "I knew a grunt from the Nam who told me when VC/ bullets sliced into his guts/ that all he thought about was the tits/ of the first girl he fucked/ in the back seat of his Chevy/ one Saturday night on the plains of Kansas" *(Walk On, Trooper* 61). Upon reading these lines, one is pulled through a vulgar emotional whirlwind which gains nothing in its brutality and which is harmed by its inability to relate these thoughts to any artistic value or insight and, thus, the potential for an intriguing insight into the war's place in a historical context is obscured.

The poem takes its title from a well-known poem by Wilfred Owen and is apparently an attempt at a comparison

between generational war experiences in response to a quote by former President George Bush. However, the message is lost by the poet's failure to make the dichotomy relevant and meaningful to the reader. In much of the poetry of the soldier-poets, allusion to literary works of the past is done in order to transcend and transume them. ". . .even to recognize the failure of an antecedent text to clarify the war is consistent with the critical project at the heart of many of these poems: the testing of the traditions from which they emerge, and the search for a salvageable meaning among their antecedents" (Goluboff 17). By framing his poem as surrounded by yet beyond the experiences of the first and second world wars, Elliot creates the potential for a powerful statement about the uniqueness of the Vietnam War, but fails in this endeavor.

A more successful example of "emotion recollected in tranquility" is Bruce Weigl's poem, "Song of Napalm," an interesting and insightful fusion of the unerasable past with the ever-evolving present. As he tries to reconcile and recreate the image of a young girl burning in napalm within the context of his present-day relationship with his wife, he realizes the inescapable nature of truth: "Nothing/ can change that, she is burned behind my eyes/ and not your good love and not the rain-swept air/ and not the jungle-green/ pasture unfolding before us can deny it" (*Song of Napalm* 35). This is the sort of recollection of which

Wordsworth speaks and of which Richmond's poetry is sorely lacking.

Although the poetry of the soldier-poets of the Vietnam War obviously takes source in the strong emotional experience of war, a major portion of their work does not necessarily serve as protest poetry against the war. Those texts were written mainly by those who were protesters during the war, in the United States. The soldier-poet's perspective is unique and important because "if one wants to know the essence of the Vietnam War, how it felt and smelled and tasted, what it did to those who fought it and why it will not go away, . . .one is likely to find more truth in these poems than in any history ever written" (*Unaccustomed Mercy* 5). Rather than serving as an act of protest against the war, the poetry of American soldiers of the Vietnam War attempts to open up the wounds of the poet's individual fragmented experience so that he can give that experience new meaning for both the past and the present. Yusef Komunyakaa, Elliot Richman, and Bruce Weigl, are soldier-poets who attempt to do this, to varying degrees of success.

Chapter 2

Yusef Komunyakaa's *Dien Cai Dau*: Artistic Fusion

Something small as a clinch pin can hold men together

-- Yusef Komunyakaa, "Fragging," Dien Cai Dau

In regard to his own poetry, Yusef Komunyakaa once wrote: "The mood I desire in my poetry is one in which the truth can survive" (Buckley & Merrill 80). Komunyakaa's poetic oeuvre has not maintained his Vietnam experience as its sole focus, but perhaps it is his poetry on this subject that truly challenges him to create a poem in which "the truth can survive" the horribly fragmenting experience of the Vietnam War. Komunyakaa manages to do so and do it with amazing artistry and insight in *Dien Cai Dau*.

Dien Cai Dau contains a chronologically arranged selection of poems about the Vietnam War that take the reader on a confused and painful journey through the past and into the present. Komunyakaa balances the anger and grief that overwhelm the works of many others writing in the same genre with a search for a universal connection for the events he has witnessed. The structure of this work is essential to its success. The reader is drawn in in the first moments of the first poem. The journey of the inexperienced reader, unfamiliar with the subject, the poet, the style, parallels that of the inexperienced soldier, unfamiliar with the terrain, the culture, the combat, the

violence. The intensity of the war into which both soldier and reader are being initiated is truly displayed in the first poem in the collection, "Camouflaging the Chimera" which takes the reader on an emotional poetic journey that is meant to mirror the strange fragmented experience of Vietnam. From the first few lines, the reader is drawn into a world that is broken into ambiguous experience behind the mask of the chimera.

But Komunyakaa accomplishes this not only by simply telling the reader a story. He also infuses his poetry with movement and intensity through diction, line-breaks, and punctuation. In the last stanzas of "Camouflaging the Chimera," the speaker's urgency and intensity are communicated by lines that seem to flow hard into one another:

> We weren't there. The river ran
> through our bones. Small animals took refuge
> against our bodies; we held our breath,
>
> ready to spring the L-shaped
> ambush, as a world revolved
> under each man's eyelid (*Dien Cai Dau* 4).

Komunyakaa wants the reader to be there with the speaker. He urgently propels the reader through the action of the poem. Thus, by simply engaging the text, the reader becomes a participant in the action which envelops him.

Despite this ability to incorporate the unsuspecting reader into the poem, Komunyakaa is able to take on other

perspectives without losing his own voice, thus creating an atmosphere in which what we must term the "other," for this is not a war in which the enemy is ever a clearly defined entity, is to be both pitied and hated, both feared and revered. "His poetry works - in part anyway - because his "in country" isn't limited to soldiers fighting and dying. His cast of characters includes civilians, bar girls, bui doi Amerasians, Red Cross workers, prisoners, an army nurse, the boat people, and himself as an under-represented member of African American people. Quite literally he is not among the palefaces" (Ringnalda 25). In other words, Komunyakaa, never becomes the norm. Instead, he lingers just outside that world, allowing himself to take in the action going on around him with a keen yet sensitive eye.

The poem "Re-creating the Scene" is a painful example of Komunyakaa's skill in humanizing this indefinable and ever-changing "other." The poem describes the rape of a Vietnamese woman by three American soldiers. Komunyakaa creates an intricate web of symbols as the speaker projects his emotions onto the victim and simultaneously injects symbolism of the racism of the south, creating a complex map of the psyche of an African-American soldier in Vietnam. A "Confederate flag/ flaps from a radio antenna" as "The three men/ ride her breath, grunting/ over lovers back in Mississippi" (*Dien Cai Dau* 19). The race of the soldiers perpetrating the rape is not important. What matters is

their ability to deconstruct social barriers by allowing the violence of war to blind them to the worth of humanity.

The violence of this act and the ugliness of its consequences are made even more horrible by the presence of the woman's infant child at the scene. At the end of the poem, the infant "makes a fist & grabs at the air/ searching for a breast." The child bears witness to their brutality and symbolizes the regenerative qualities of a war that seems to have no boundaries, no clear moral mission. With this detail, the speaker seriously calls into question the humanity of the American soldiers themselves. The speaker becomes further removed from the actions of his peers, but also maintains the objective distance of a reporter from the pain of the woman whose rape he has witnessed. "I inform the Overseas Weekly/ flashbulbs retract her face/ in a room full of polished brass" (*Dien Cai Dau* 20).

The episodes on which Komunyakaa centers each poem are carefully chosen to reflect a broader concept that makes it relevant not only to those that have been there, but also for those whose lives have barely touched this type of experience. For example, in "We Never Know," the speaker is forced to come face-to-face with the humanity of the other: "I pulled the crumbled photograph/ from his fingers./ There's no other way/ to say this: I fell in love." Both the speaker and the reader gain an incredible, instantaneous insight into the complexities of the war through this situation. Komunyakaa writes about his poetic process: "This

is how poems happen for me. Bits and pieces, glimpses and strokes, hints and imagistic nudges, and at some almost-accidental moment it all flies together - not to make sense but to induce a feeling" (Kuusisto, et al. 136). It seems that it is this process that makes his poetry so effective. He is able to recognize the incredible significance of emotion in brief moments of memory and articulate them in a way that is stunningly vivid for the reader.

And it is this process that reveals, for lack of a better term, the beauty of the experience -- the beauty that is revealed in truth. Bruce Weigl writes in his poem "The Impossible": "Say it clearly and you make it beautiful, no matter what" (Buckley & Merrill 162). This level of truth in the experiences Komunyakaa communicates, the degree to which the reader reads them and truly feels something for the participants, projects the unsettling beauty of these images.

Komunyakaa recognizes and strives for this strange sort of beauty in his poetry:

> ". . . it is this down-to-earthness that I hope informs the main tenor of my poetry - a language that deals with the atribilious nature of our existence, as well as the emotional weight of its beauty. . . the violent serenity that Jean Toomer attempted to capture in *Cane*, and the fact that for one to embrace such moments is antithetical to the European psyche and its classic fear of the unknown" (Buckley & Merrill 80).

It is clear that, in the very act of creating a poem, Komunyakaa is very much concerned with capturing the moment at which truth, beauty, and violence meet in a strange but intriguing medley.

Komunyakaa subtly incorporates these conflicting elements into his poems not by simply stating their existence, but by interlacing his poetry with prosodic elements that parallel the emotions or ideas that drive the poem. For example, Komunyakaa's "Fragging" deals with a phenomenon peculiar to war in which a platoon murders their commanding officer in order to avoid putting their lives in danger.

Although not original to the Vietnam War, the phenomenon took on a greater significance in this conflict because of the nature of the war, especially after 1969 when President Nixon began pulling out American troops:

> Many American soldiers failed to see the purpose of dying in a war that their government was presumably abandoning. Many units at the platoon and squad level were refusing to obey orders that they perceived to place their lives in peril. It was this attitude of fear and frustration combined with drug use, racial tension, and the inherent inequality of the military … that led to fragging … In the end fragging had

become a symptom of a demoralized army (Olson 160).

Komunyakaa provides an underlying sense of these conflicts at work in his poem. In reading "Fragging," the reader notices that the pace of the poem changes in correlation with the action that is being described. In the beginning of the poem, the reader senses the hesitancy and captivating tension of the decision-making process as Komunyakaa weaves the reader through a series of stop and start endings with each progressing line:

> "We won't be wasting a real man.
> That lieutenant's too gung ho.
> Think, man, 'bout how Turk
> got blown away; next time
> it's you or me. Hell,
> the truth is the truth" (*Dien Cai Dau* 16).

The chillingly succinct speech of the speaker is clearly delineated by hard end-stop lines that give the opinions stated here the weight of fact. Then, rationalization spins uncontrollably on in the next four lines, hurling the reader into the altered psyche of a soldier whose survival instinct has taken over, causing his only value for life to be a value for his own. The third line in the passage above ends with the name Turk and as the reader moves quickly into the next line we learn that Turk "got blown away" and then, as this line ends with the suspenseful "next time," the reader is once again quickly forced into the psychological rationalization that "it's you

or me." But it is the sixth line from this passage that truly opens up this poem. We are told by the speaker that "the truth is the truth" just as he asks us to question what that truth is by making statements of opinion sound like fact, creating a truth that he feels will help him to survive.

Chapter 3

Elliot Richman's Walk On, Trooper: Locked In

One skims the memory like a moviola
editing out the candid shots
--John Balaban, "News Update,"

Elliot Richman seems to be so obsessed with the immediacy of the Vietnam experience that he cannot escape it and look upon it from a perspective of reflection. He has not yet gained the ability to infuse his poems with the meaning that they might gain from Wordsworth's "emotion recollected in tranquility."

Instead, Richman infuses his poetry with gritty details of strange sexual encounters and gruesome deaths that serve as a linear snapshot of a single experience. But, unlike some of the more successful poets, he doesn't take this experience beyond the moment of occurrence and into the present to create a meaningful past. He remains captivated by the actions themselves and, thus, is unable to transform those actions into a metaphor of the Vietnam experience as a whole.

In his poem "Sally's Night Song to Elliot," Richman waxes guilty about a sexual encounter with a woman who later died serving as a nurse in Vietnam. He writes the poem in the first person from Sally's perspective and attempts to bring the experience into the present by referencing the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial:

> My name is now carved on another wall,
> A tree of black granite,

in sexless comradeship
with all whose deaths
were just as senseless (*Walk On Trooper* 81).

But this potentially powerful image is dwarfed by the speaker's own characterization of the poet as someone who probably doesn't even remember her except as "just some girl you fucked/ when you wanted to become a writer/ a part of that reality of experience/ you so desired/ a spark on the anvil of your soul/ so easily extinguished" (*Walk On Trooper* 81). Once the reader gains this understanding of the poet's search for reality, it is difficult to believe he is even capable of attributing significant insight to the experiences of which he writes.

After the reader learns about the strange and casual encounter between the poet and the speaker, the reader is abruptly informed, "Anyway, I died in Nam while you cowered at the Writer's Workshop" and the details of the death are delineated: "A Jack of Hearts beat me to death in Hue, just before Tet" (*Walk on Trooper* 81). This information does little more than make the reader feel contempt for a poet who apparently writes this poem out of a guilt that comes far too late.

Despite this distance in time, the poet still can't separate out the insightful portions of this experience for the reader. He writes the poem from the perspective of "Sally" but it does not seem to benefit anyone but the poet himself. It is as if he is purging a tortured soul that has

yet to reconcile past actions with present emotion in such a way that it becomes important for the reader.

Richman also tends to take on other perspectives to an annoying extent. The titles alone of some of these poems are indicators of the overdone content. For example, one poem is titled, "To the Old Tune Autumn Evening Beside the Lake as Sung by a Courtesan from the City of Saigon in the Year of the Snake." This lengthy title, which is almost longer than the poem itself, is indicative of the search for context and meaning that Richman never seems to be able to accurately pinpoint. The poem's speaker is a Saigon prostitute who lures GIs into sexual encounters while a boy drops a grenade into the gas tank of their vehicle. Admittedly, the subject matter is less than elevated. But that does not mean that the level of artistry must be the same. Rather than draw on the themes of a potentially intriguing fragment of experience, Richman simply lays out the facts of this episode, failing to exact the same concise and intricate details that are characteristically interwoven within Komunyakaa's works.

This is evident as he describes the physical appearance of the prostitute. "In my short shorts & tie-dyed blouse tattooed with a peace sign/ I called to the Americans on Tu Do Street: 'Beaucoup boom boom/ beaucoup boom boom, fella. Howboutit? Huh?'" (*Walk On, Trooper* 30). There is an opportunity here to seize upon an intriguing symbol: the peace sign. Yet, Richman consistently fails to recognize

and elaborate upon these details. Rather than focus on the small twists of coincidence and irony that make the entire scene come together, Richman focuses on the broad view of the scene itself, thus obscuring the more intricate elements of the scene that give it the qualities he wants it to possess.

Comparing this poem of Richman's with the poem "Saigon Bar Girls, 1975" by Yusef Komunyakaa helps exemplify this flaw in Richman's work. After reading lines like this from Komunyakaa's poem: "Unmirrored/ they sigh and forget/ their lists of Mikes/ Bills, Joes, & Johns/ as they shed miniskirts/ thinner than memories/ denied, letting them fall/ into a hush/ at their feet," one cannot help but mark the difference in quality between these poems. Komunyakaa uses miniskirts as a metaphor for memory as they "fall/ into a hush/ at their feet," infusing this image of beleaguered prostitutes with a sense of beauty and surrealism (*Dien Cai Dau* 54). But Richman's poem simply states what was there, giving his description a flat, dull quality.

Richman continues through the poem to gloss over potentially interesting points at which he could have turned the poem into something more than a description of tragedy. For example, he writes: "So I did to them/ the things their wives and girlfriends couldn't even imagine./ Ten thousand years of Asian sex in each finger tip/ while the smell of them made me sick" (*Walk On Trooper* 30). Since he is writing the poem in the first person from the perspective of

this prostitute, perhaps if Richman had taken the opportunity to delve into the twisted psyche, the probably unbearable economic conditions that led this girl to do the sort of things she is doing, then maybe the poem would have a little more to offer its reader. Instead, the only glimpse into her psyche that the reader gets is that "Watching them writhe in passion I imagined them writhing/ in a bed of real fire when their vehicle blew up because a boy/ had dropped a grenade into their gas tank" and this view is not sufficient to draw any conclusions about her character (*Walk On, Trooper* 30). It leaves the reader questioning the speaker's motives, her depth of emotion.

Thus, in taking on the perspective of this speaker, Richman has gone both too far and not far enough. He has gone too far in that the poem seems contrived because of it and he has not gone far enough in that he has not taken some interesting perceptions to another level of understanding that would open up a new perspective on the poem.

So, it seems that Richman's central flaw is his inability to hone in on the fragment of the experience that unlocks the door for us all. Until he does this, he will continue to be outranked by Komunyakaa and by other gifted soldier-poets like Bruce Weigl who turn the experiences they write about inside out, making the internal mode of experience a little bit more accessible to the reader on the outside of that experience.

Chapter 4

Bruce Weigl's* Song of Napalm: *Situating Fragments of Time

"Out of the horror there arises a musical ache that is beautiful." -- James Wright

Bruce Weigl's book of poetry, *Song of Napalm*, contains an introduction in which Robert Stone writes that Weigl's poetry "is compounded of explosive moments that illuminate a terrifying landscape . . . The poet compels our complicity as his witnesses . . . He pursues every act and image to its essence, displays it for us and shakes it for meaning, strips it and puts it together again" (Stone, *Song of Napalm*, "Introduction"). Weigl's poetry is characterized by this relentless desire to situate the strange, unique experience of war within the context of a past and a present that are changed forever by that experience.

As a veteran, Weigl "must recall the war and transform it into something worth remembering" because it is something he will never forget (Reilly 47). He must deal with the permanence of memory by making it relevant not only to himself, but also to the world around him, a world which is also inhabited by even those of us who weren't around to witness the Vietnam War. This is a difficult task: to communicate the horrible beautiful tragedy of war to people who never have and probably never will experience it. But Weigl makes every effort to focus on those small but

powerful moments suspended in time that drive a powerful punch and pierce the reader's perspective of reality.

Weigl's own perspectives have been, quite clearly, immensely altered by his war experience. He is forced to construct two different pasts: a past that includes the Vietnam War, a past that must stand distinctly alone, and a past previous to this, a past whose innocence makes it shockingly distinct to the past which followed it. Weigl flows almost unseamingly back and forth between these two pasts, underlining their distinction by allowing them to bleed into one another and building starkly contrasting connections between them. His poem "Amnesia" reflects this well:

> AMNESIA
> If there was a world more disturbing than this
> where black clouds bowed down and swallowed you whole
> and overgrown tropical plants
> rotted, effervescent in the muggy twilights and monkeys
> screamed something
> that came to sounds like words to each other
> across the triple-canopy jungle you shared,
> you don't remember it.
>
> You tell yourself no and cry a thousand days.
> You imagine the crows calling autumn into place
> are your brothers and you could
> if only the strength and will were there
> fly up to them to be black
> and useful to the wind (*Song of Napalm* 53).

Weigl seems to want to reconcile these divergent pasts in order to make the present more bearable. "Ultimately,

the poet can accept his [Vietnam] past because he looks for, and finds, something meaningful in it, even a portion of beauty" (Reilly 49). Weigl finds elements of beauty in the war that assist him in this endeavor. The brutality of this experience is, in some ways, overpowered by the "perfunctory heroism of the everyday," to paraphrase Henry James. The poet magnifies the small gestures of normality to which victims of a war experience cling like a life line. For example, in "Girl at the Chu Lai Laundry," Weigl expresses the beauty in the idea that the mundane aspects of life go on for some, despite the advent of war. His envy of this level of consciousness is apparent:

> Who would've thought the world stops
> turning in the war, the tropical heat like hate
> and your platoon moves out without you,
> your wet clothes piled
> at the feet of the girl at the laundry,
> beautiful with her facts (*Song of Napalm* 4).

It is this recognition of beautiful innocence in the midst of violence that allows Weigl a certain sympathy with, or at least awareness of, the humanity of the enemy. This is made quite clear in Weigl's poems. In "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down," Weigl recognizes the humanity of the enemy, sees the enemy as victim, echoing Komunyakaa's skill. The poem recounts the initiation of the soldier who is "barely in country" and "did not yet hate the beautiful war." This oxymornonic description of the war reflects Weigl's uncertainty in his struggle to find meaning in his

experience. Within moments of being in country, the speaker is introduced to the arbitrary violence that will become a part of his life from point on:

> I have no excuse for myself.
> I sat in that man's jeep in the rain
> and watched him slam her down to her knees,
> the plastic butt of his M-16
> crashing down on her.
> I was barely in country, the clouds
> hung like huge flowers, black
> like her teeth (*Song of Napalm* 13-14).

In this horrible moment, Weigl is initiated into the violent culture of war. But it is his reflection on this experience that forces him to see its tragic beauty. The distance of time allows Weigl the use of "emotion recollected in tranquillity." And it is this perspective of reflection that makes Weigl's words more than pure description. They become a succinct pocket in time, a small but powerful expression of the complexities of war made relevant even to those readers who were not a part of the Vietnam War experience. There is a depth of emotional insight in the poem that allows the non-veteran reader to at least scratch the surface of the wrenching emotional state of the soldier-poet. Weigl conveys the psychological dynamics of the speaker without ignoring the humanity of the enemy/victim, thus allowing one to read the poem in terms of the dynamics of human experience and emotion.

Weigl isolates the fragments of experience that bring the emotions of that experience to a broader level. He acts

as an interpreter of experience in a context of misconception, misunderstanding, and ignorance. He makes the war experience more relevant to a reader who many not have been born when the experience took place. In Weigl's poetry, "the past reappears superimposed on the present" (Reilly 51).

In his poem "Anna Grasa," the strange divergent realities that the soldier must confront upon his return to America act as an fitting context in which to grapple with an unerasable past and a drastically altered present and future. The speaker, upon his return home from combat, is forced into a shockingly superficial reality in which he can see the tragedy in both his own experience and in the garish pride with which his family tries to welcome him back to an experience which he no longer owns.

The poem's title refers to the speaker's grandmother, a silent symbol of the simple love and understanding the speaker left behind. He is suspended somewhere between the conflicting realities of past and present, war and peace, comedy and tragedy, travelling through the actions of the poem into the tragically beautiful arms of his grandmother:

> Out of the car I moved
> up on the sign
> dreaming myself full,
> the sign that cut the sky,
> my eyes burned,
> but behind the terrible thing
> I saw my grandmother,
> beautiful Anna Grasa (*Song of Napalm* 62).

The "terrible thing" the speaker refers to is both the enormous, spotlighted, orange glow-painted sign his father had made to welcome him home and the war itself. This is a wonderful example of Weigl's attempts to unite conflicting but often symbolically linked temporal realities. This sign is an act of hyperbole that amplifies the speaker's inner conflict:

> I came home from Vietnam.
> My father had a sign
> made at the foundry:
> WELCOME HOME BRUCE
> in orange glow paint.
> He rented spotlights,
> I had to squint.
> WELCOME HOME BRUCE (*Song of Napalm* 62).

The first line of the poem is a statement of fact that is perhaps the only truth the speaker truly knows. But the blinding lights and colors of the sign obscure even that vision of home the soldier wants so desperately to cling to. Instead, he is forever thrust into a spotlight, either by others or self-imposed, that exposes his precarious position between a mind that won't allow him to forget and a world that wants to put his past behind it. The words on the sign, printed in bold, amplify those conflicts and amplify the speaker's pain so much so that he "had to squint," conjuring up images of the grimace of a wounded soldier.

The speaker wants to retreat into the world he left behind, immersing himself in its innocent complacency even

though he has already admitted his separateness from that understanding of reality:

> beautiful Anna Grasa.
> I couldn't tell her.
>
> I clapped to myself,
> clapped to the sound of her dress.
> I could have put it on
> she held me so close.
> Both of us could be inside (*Song of Napalm* 63).

Weigl isolates this strange moment, magnifying the intensity it takes on for the speaker, magnifying its importance for the reader. He wants us to understand the impossibility of a silent, passive complacency after the experience of war in Vietnam. From this one brief moment in time, we understand the never-ending reconciliation of truths that time forces the veteran of Vietnam to endure. His welcome home is made glaringly irrelevant by the ugliness of the war.

Weigl continues his struggle with the inevitability of time in the poem whose title also serves as the title of his most recent collection of poetry, "Song of Napalm." This poem, like several of Weigl's poems, does not take place in country. Instead, it takes place after the speaker has returned from war. Now, he must continue his journey through the grief of time in the context of a love relationship with his wife.

The poem begins with a tranquil scene as the speaker and his wife watch horses in a misty field. But, for him, even this serene moment is displaced by an altered sense of

reality. The horses "faded/ like cut-out horses/ away from us" and the landscape transforms into a battlefield where "trees scraped their voices into the wind, branches/ crisscrossed the sky like barbed wire/ but you said they were only branches" (*Song of Napalm* 33). It is only through acceptance of the indelible past that the speaker is able to truly find some semblance of serenity. But, in order to do this, he must confront the violence that captivates his world and, thus, "The past reappears superimposed on the present" (Reilly 51).

As the speaker feels himself revert into the painful memories of the past, he tries to pull himself back into the present, using language that draws the reader directly into his thought process:

> Okay. The storm stopped pounding.
> I am trying to say this straight for once
> I was sane enough to pause and breathe
> outside my wild plans and after the hard rain
> I turned my back on the old curses. I believed
> they swung finally away from me ...
> (*Song of Napalm* 33-34)

But, in reality, the speaker inevitably returns to the undeniable past. Elements of nature demonstrate Weigl's "adroit juxtaposition of placid vistas with war scenes" (Ehrhart *Unaccustomed Mercy* xv). Branches are wire, thunder is mortar, and the landscape is transformed by the memories that remain of a "girl/ running from her village, napalm/ stuck to her dress like jelly/ her hands reaching for the no

one/ who waits in waves of heat before her (*Song of Napalm* 34). He takes the reader through the cognitive process of learning to manage a life that is shaped by a "frustrated search for meaning" (Hidalgo 6).

The speaker constructs an escape from this tortured life of memory by recreating the scene that allow the girl eternally burning in napalm within his mind by envisioning that the guilt of the present as "she runs down the road and wing/ beat inside her until she rises/ above the stinking jungle and her pain/ eases , and your pain, and mine." This wishful attempt to redefine the past attempts to reconcile the past with the present. But it fails because it is not truth and "the lie swings back again./ The lie works only as long as it takes to speak/ and the girl runs only as far/ as the napalm allows" (*Song of Napalm* 34).

The limitations of language mix with the undeniable unerasable past, but it is the speaker's acceptance of the indelible truth of history that gives him some sense of freedom from it. The speaker knows that even the most positive aspects of his post-Vietnam reality won't make the pain of memory any less substantial. But, in simply recognizing this fact, in simply writing it or speaking it, he is freeing himself from the guilty pain of memory.

Chapter 5

Confronting the Enemy

"you feel you could reach out
& take him into your arms."
-- Yusef Komunyakkaa, "Starlight Scope Myopia," Dien Cai Dau

One of the most jarring and telling experiences recollected in war poetry is a recognition of the enemy, a confrontation with the enemy that forces the soldier to recognize the enemy as a human being. The enemy is no longer objectified and the line between the enemy and the self is blurred.

This action is further complicated in the Vietnam War since the question of defining the enemy was integral to the success of the war. South Vietnamese and North Vietnamese were indistinguishable and Viet Cong and non-Viet Cong were equally indistinguishable. And, because of the nature of the warfare, the American soldiers could easily perceive the enmity within themselves. Thus, the soldier-poets deal with this dilemma directly and indirectly throughout much of their work. The three poets that have been discussed separately but in detail in this text each have poems that deal directly with this issue of confronting the enemy and it is through a comparison of these poems that the difference in each writer's abilities is quite clearly revealed.

Yusef Komunyakaa's poem "Starlight Scope Myopia" weaves a complex psychological web in which the enemy becomes almost a hallucinated figure, coming in and out of focus, mirroring the view from the scope of the speaker's rifle. This unique view incorporates the reader into the action of the poem, all of which takes place in the speaker's mind, an interesting perspective that truly incorporates the reader into the text.

"Starlight Scope Myopia" is the first poem within *Dien Cai Dau* in which the enemy is present. And the enemy is seen in a myopic perspective from the scope of his enemy's rifle. And yet, in the beginning of the poem, the enemy are merely "shadows" that "lift shadows onto on oxcart." The scope of the weapon becomes like a psychological telescope that magnifies the enemy and his humanity, bringing him closer and closer into view.

It is this perspective in which the speaker brings the enemy closer into view but remains a distinct from him that makes Komunyakaa's poem successful. As with much of his poetry, in "Starlight Scope Myopia," Komunyakaa positions the speaker as an examiner as well as an actor.

This perspective is magnified by the fact that the speaker is looking back into the haze of memory at the "Smoke-colored/ Viet Cong" that "move under our eyelids/ lords over loneliness/ winding like coral vine through/ sandalwood & lotus/ inside our lowered heads/ years after this scene ends" (*Dien Cai Dau* 8). Thus, memory acts as its

own scope, zeroing in on an already obscured image, trying to bring it into the light of the present, attempting to make this fragment of experience more clear.

The poem illustrates the remarkable gap that exits between the soldier and his enemy -- the psychological barrier that war constructs in which "The brain closes down" and the enemy is perceived as an object to be detected, as an animal performing the strange dance of the hunter and the hunted:

> What looks like
> one step into the trees,
>
> they're lifting crates of ammo
> & sacks of rice, swaying
>
> under their shared weight (*Dien Cai Dau* 8).

And, yet, there is no certainty even as this vision of what the speaker describes as "What looks like one" stumbles and sways into the range of the scope.

Komunyakaa intricately weaves layers of meaning into the poem, making the complicated psychology of war come to life within the mind of a reader who is "Caught in the infrared" along with a speaker whose thoughts and actions are dictated by what the scope brings into view, and along with the enemy that the scope focuses upon. Thus, this metaphor comes full circle, bringing the reader into the

action of the play as the speaker shifts from first to second person:

> One of them is laughing.
> You want to place a finger
>
> to his lips & say "shhhh."
> You try to read ghost talk
>
> on their lips. They say
> "up-up we go," lifting as one.
> This one, old, bowlegged,
>
> you feel you could reach out
> & take him into your arms. You
>
> peer down the sights of your M-16,
> seeing the full moon
> loaded onto an oxcart (*Dien Cai Dau* 9).

This shift in perspective mirrors a shift in perception of the enemy, now no longer hidden in shadows, but, in the mind of the speaker, someone whom "you feel you could reach out/ & take him into your arms." The enemy has come the crisp, clear, focused, yet strange image of "This one, old, bowlegged" individual, an unlikely enemy made probable by virtue of a war that has no clear enemy and no clear winner.

Elliot Richman's poem, "The Labyrinth," is a more successful example of his own work, but fails to equal the artistry exemplified in the works of Komunyakaa. The poem deals with one of the many ways in which the warfare practiced during this war in Vietnam was so psychologically and physically grueling. It refers to a soldier who is a tunnel rat, a soldier "specially trained to attack Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army underground positions. In South Vietnam there were hundreds of miles of tunnels the

Viet Cong used to protect living areas, storage depots, ordnance factories, hospitals, and supplies from American air and artillery strikes" (Olson459). In "The Labyrinth," Richman's speaker is one of these soldiers that "slithered through the tunnels under Nam" as he became "no longer human in form, a killer of men, a dark rabbit in Alice's white hole," searching for enemies to kill. In doing this, becomes characteristic of an enemy himself.

The dirty, ugly world of the tunnels of war take him into a world of heightened senses that magnify the dirt and disgust around him.

> I crawled through shit that smelled like fish
> or the crotch of a two-bit Tu Do whore.
> Half blind from tear gas, half mad from malice,
> squashing under my fingers giant jungle ants
> or strangling snakes with the strength of men,
> I sought what lurked in the darkness below,
> knowing already the horror above
> (*Walk On, Trooper* 16).

Richman, as noted previously in some of his other works, glides right past an interesting parallel that could be drawn from the "darkness below" and the "horror above" and, instead, moves right into a description of the enemy ahead of him as he approaches "a gook's lair stinking of death/ and napalm wounds, gangrene like mustard gas/ or hag's breath" (*Walk On, Trooper* 16).

His first encounter with enemy occurs within this context. And, this first enemy is dead, negating the very necessity for enmity between the two. Yet, in this dark underworld of warfare, the distinction still exists. Once

again, Richman has identified an interesting point at which the poem can turn and, to his credit, he does allow these details to lead the poem into an interesting territory. The first one he encounters "had been dead for days." He then goes on to shoot the other two soldiers there and instantly realizes that there is someone else there too:

> I sensed her silence
> in the darkness and turned my light, catching
> her maddened face in the gloom, her legs
> spread apart as the child slipped from her
> without even a wail, knowing already the ways of
> this war (*Walk On, Trooper* 16).

Richman makes an interesting parallel here using the ideas of birth and death that occur within the same gruesome context of violence. This is an intriguing notion but the level of poetic effectiveness here is lacking. As the speaker begins to feel sympathy for this woman, the ever-changing face of the enemy is revealed:

> I wanted to help. I reached out
> to cut the cord when she lunged at me
> with a stick grenade, the baby tied to her
> (*Walk On, Trooper* 16).

Compare those words to Komunyakaa's expression of sympathy or understanding toward the enemy in a poem like "Starlight Scope Myopia" in which he writes, "You feel you could reach out/ & take him into your arms" or in a poem like "We Never Know" in which he writes of the enemy he has just killed: "There's no other way/ to say this: I fell in love" (*Dien Cai Dau* 9 & 26). This juxtaposition makes the difference in

the two poets' abilities plainly clear. Komunyakaa's ability to create a concisely beautiful and descriptive phrase gives his poetry a level of sophistication which Richman cannot attain.

Bruce Weigl, however, does come closer to the Komunyakaa "ideal." Weigl's poetry attempts to incorporate larger themes into small but impacting fragments of memory and he does so quite successfully. Weigl's poem "Dialectical Materialism" is, like the other poems discussed in this chapter, a poem in which the speaker confronts the enemy. However, it is slightly different because it is written about an encounter with the enemy after the war is over.

"Dialectical Materialism" begins with the speaker walking through the darkened streets of Old Hanoi in December of 1985. The tranquil scene he describes here contrasts starkly with the fragmented scenes of violence that are illustrated in other poems. In this poem, the concept of dialectical materialism, in which the material basis of reality is constantly changing in a dialectical process of matter over mind, truly allows the psyche of the speaker to come full circle and bring the violence of the past into the context of the present.

The speaker sets the scene with the mundane qaulities of life in post-war Vietnam:

> On one block
> the rich steam from pho,
> their morning and evening soup, rises,

on another
brown smoked ducks are strung up in a row.
The people talk and smoke,
men hold each other's hands again in that old way
and children,
their black and white laughter all around us,
kick the weighted feather
with such grace into the air
because the bombs have stopped
(*Song of Napalm* 66).

But, rather than get lost in generality of this description, Weigl hones in on one individual, narrowing the focus of his attention to " a man/ filling buckets/ hung across his back's yoke/ to bring cool water to his corn/ in the moonlight" (*Song of Napalm* 65-66). In doing this, Weigl is able to use the experience to extract meaning for questions that must weigh heavily on the mind of any soldier once he is no longer living his life in the context of the intensity of warfare.

The speaker questions the man who "points to a stone and stick/ house beyond the dikes/ one thousand meters from the bridge/ our great planes/ could not finally knock down," describing in this single encounter the historical resilience of the Vietnamese people, the same resilience that resulted in the lengthy war that altered the speaker's perceptions of reality.

But, it is what the man doesn't say that intrigues the speaker the most. It is the man's ability, perhaps necessity, to look only upon the present without referencing the memories of the past, that truly allows the speaker to

come full circle and address the issues that have haunted him in his post-Vietnam War reality:

> He doesn't say
> how he must have huddled
> those nights with his family,
> how he must have spread himself
> over them
> until the village bell
> called them back to their beds
> (*Song of Napalm* 67).

He is amazed and, perhaps, inspired by this resilience of mind and spirit demonstrated by this man who, once, would have been an enemy, a suspect, but never a person with whom he could never converse.

But, the speaker comes to the realization of the dialectical materialist that "There are questions which/ people who have everything/ ask people who have nothing/ and they do not understand" (*Song of Napalm* 67). This realization comes out of a lifetime of reasoning that is encapsulated in that fragment of time when the speaker must confront the idea of the enemy without the conflict that surrounded them in existence. Their only barrier now is that of language.

Weigl's poetry is not necessarily worse than Komunyakaa's. Instead, it is distinctly different. Weigl writes poetry almost exclusively about Vietnam. Thus, his writing is the result of a lifetime of working through that experience. Komunyakaa, on the other hand, has written only one book of poetry dedicated to the subject of Vietnam but has written extensively on other subjects. Perhaps this is

wherein lies his strength. *Dien Cai Dau* has a cathartic feel to it that pulls the reader through the experience from the time the soldier hits the soil until the time he must confront the black granite wall of the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington, D.C. Weigl's poetry, on the other hand, is more of a life-long journey to find truth and beauty in the context of a past that is scarred by war. Richman simply does not demonstrate the capabilities of the other two poets. After reading *Walk On, Trooper*, one only feels more confused, as if the soldier kept walking on and never came home.

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